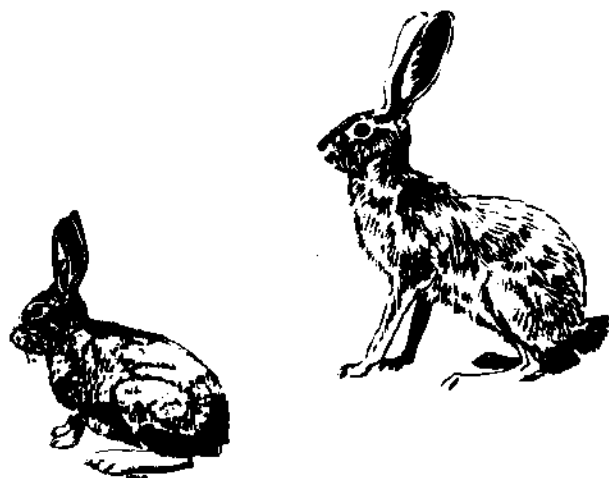


# **\*\*ATTENTION\*\***

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## HARES



In the State of Washington

Three species of hares, the snowshoe rabbit and the white-tailed and black-tailed jackrabbits, may be found in Washington.

The snowshoe rabbit, *Lepus americanus*, also called snowshoe hare or varying hare, inhabits the forested mountains of the state and also the lowlands of western Washington. At an average weight of two to four pounds, it is intermediate in size between the cottontails and jackrabbits. Its huge well-haired hind feet enable it to run easily on only slightly crusted snow, earning for it the "snowshoe" sobriquet. The term "varying" refers to the animal's change of color with the season. At the autumn molt, the hare's brown coat is replaced by one of pure white except for black-tipped ears. This color change does not occur in the western Washington form.

The white-tailed jackrabbit, *L. townsendii* is our largest hare, weighing six to nine pounds. It is found throughout the bunchgrass-sagebrush country of eastern Washington, with the larger population in the northern part of its range. It is light grayish-brown, and has a white tail with a dark line along the upper side. In winter it becomes lighter in color, sometimes all white with black-tipped ears. The white-tailed jackrabbit was almost displaced from the state by the spread of the black-tail in the 1940's, but since then it has regained much of its former range.

The black-tailed jackrabbit, *L. californicus*, weighs four to six pounds. It is darker gray than the white-tail, and the upper surface of the tail is black. It is thought to be a relatively recent addition to our fauna, invading the state from the south around 1870. It crossed the Snake River about 1905, and in January 1920 it crossed the Columbia on the ice. After occupying most of the white-tail range, it retreated to the area with 10 inches or less of rainfall.

Hares are not true rodents but belong to a group called lagomorphs. They differ from rodents in having 28 teeth, whereas rodents have from

16 to 22. Our other representatives of the lagomorphs are three species of rabbits and the pika or "rock rabbit" of the high mountain rock slides.

Hares have longer ears and hind legs than rabbits and there are also internal differences. Young rabbits are born blind and hairless, while hares come into the world well-furred and active. Hares trust to speed to escape enemies; rabbits seek shelter in burrows.

The home range of a jackrabbit is seldom over two miles; that of a snowshoe rabbit usually a half mile or less. On rare occasions they may migrate cross-country as a result of overpopulation, severe weather, or other factors.

Mating begins in early spring and continues until late summer. The mother hare may have only one litter of three or four young per year, or she may have several. Sometimes, for unknown reasons, the rate of reproduction increases causing an overpopulation of hares. This is usually followed by a sudden decline as diseases and predators go to work.

Large populations of jackrabbits may cause economic loss to ranchers by reducing the carrying capacity of a range for cattle. One range conservationist determined that 50 jackrabbits would eat as much as one steer. Jackrabbits also invade irrigated hayfields which are adjacent to rangeland.

Hares are not important game animals in Washington. Some sportsmen hunt snowshoe rabbits for sport and for their excellent meat. The jackrabbits are sometimes hunted for sport but are seldom eaten.

#### HABITAT NEEDS

Food. Hares are almost entirely vegetarian although they may nibble at carrion occasionally. Since they eat almost any kind of vegetation and can subsist on bark in the winter, they rarely suffer from a lack of food.

Cover. Hares are the chief food of the larger predators such as the golden eagle, horned owl, coyote, and bobcat. They need open brushy areas or forest cover to help evade these predators.

Water is accepted when available but dew and succulent plants are probably enough to supply the animal's needs. Undoubtedly many hares live and die without ever seeing free water.

#### MANAGEMENT

Snowshoe rabbits may be encouraged by limiting grazing on forest understory and promoting the growth of food and cover plants.

State of Washington      Plant Science Handbook      Biology Section  
USDA - Soil Conservation Service      Spokane, Washington March 1970